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ABSTRACT

Teachers have long used the media--and particularly film--to accomplish various instructional objectives such as building background for particular topics or motivating student reaction and analysis. The appeal of visual media continues to make film, video, and television educational tools with high potential impact; and (because of videocassette recorders) they are now considerably more accessible and less cumbersome to use. Film can be used as an adjunct to almost any discipline and is particularly effective in teaching different kinds of learners. Film can link disciplinary perspectives, can serve very specific courses and units, and can target and motivate writing. The mass media are an integral part of the environment in which today's students learn to read, write, listen, speak, and make meaning of their lives. This is a major reason that a properly designed course of instruction can use film to channel a student's enthusiasm and route it to an academically useful goal. (MS)

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Using Film, Video, and TV in the Classroom

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Teachers have long used the media – and particularly film – to accomplish various instructional objectives such as building background for particular topics or motivating student reaction and analysis. The appeal of visual media continues to make film, video, and television educational tools with high potential impact; and they are now considerably more accessible and less cumbersome to use.

The use of film in the classroom has become more popular since the arrival of the videocassette recorder (VCR) with its relative economy and ease of operation. The opinion of one teacher probably echoes the opinion of many others: "The VCR gave us flexibility. We could watch the first exciting twenty minutes, stop the tape and discuss elements of introduction, mood, suspense, and characterization – and view it again....The VCR is simple to operate, portable, and less expensive." (Farmer, 1987) Another educator who has considered the potential of the VCR believes that "one of the pedagogical tasks of the next decade may well be discovering the most efficacious ways of employing this omnipresent piece of technology." (Gallagher, 1987) Another teacher pinpoints a reason for the potential: "Because students live in a media-oriented world, they consider sight and sound as 'user friendly.'" (Post, 1987)

The potential applications are wide-ranging

Even before the advent of the VCR, the "introduction to film course" had become a staple in most American universities (Lovell, 1987). What has become apparent over the years is that film can be used as an adjunct to almost any discipline, especially the language arts. And it can be particularly effective in teaching different kinds of learners. Lovell notes that in addition to encouraging the use and development of communication skills, film can be used to establish a social context for English as a second language and to provide visual "texts" for deaf students.

Post (1987) argues that videotapes of literary classics can become powerful allies of the teacher in the English classroom if used effectively. She adds that films allow the teaching of longer works that might otherwise be omitted or of controversial works that might be excluded from the curriculum. The example she gives is of Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Although it is definitely an adult film, its screenplay contains none of the potentially objectionable material or language that appears in the original play.

Film can link disciplinary perspectives

Film can also be used in interdisciplinary studies. Krukones and several colleagues (1986) designed an interdisciplinary college-level course integrating political science, literature, and film to examine politics on the local, state, national, and international levels. Based on the premise that students too often sort information into categories dictated by the different courses they take, the authors developed the course to enable students to get from theoretical politics a clearer, practical meaning with broader implications. Such concepts are not easy for all students to grasp, but can be more affectively experienced when studied in the context of a political novel or movie.

In Krukones's course, four novels and their analogous films correspond to particular political spheres: "The Last Hurrah" (local), "All the King's Men" (state), "Advise and Consent" (national), and "Fail-Safe" (international). Following an overview of a novel or film, specific scenes and passages are discussed and are related to real-world politics. Classes meet for 2 1/2 hours once a week, so that more than one discipline can be dealt with and sufficient time for movie viewing is available.

Films can serve very specific courses and units

The range of courses in which film can play a major instructional role is wide. For example, White (1985) reported on the effective use of film in a college-level course called "Women and Violence in Literature and Film"; Dyer (1987) developed a secondary-level mini-course on "Rural America in Film and Literature."

Dyer's course encompasses nearly all the mass media forms. It begins with readings of several classic short stories with rural settings by Willa Cather and John Steinbeck. It proceeds by examining articles from the newspaper about farm issues and incidents, and then it has the students view the recent movies, "Country" and "The River," both of which portray contemporary life on a farm. Next the students view a 27-minute television documentary about three women farmers in Minnesota; and then the course continues with the study of the recent best-selling novels, "The Beans of Egypt" and "In Country." It concludes by having the students listen to several segments of the radio program "Lake Wobegon Days."

Rebhorn (1987) also uses Hollywood movies to enliven and enrich history classes, with the conviction that film brings an immediacy and interest to historical events that students often consider dull because they occurred long ago and faraway. Some of the films which she uses are "Inherit the Wind," "The Grapes of Wrath," "All the President's Men," and "Reds."

Another example of more focused use of film and television in the classroom is found in a course on the Holocaust (Michalczyk, 1982). A review of Holocaust films yielded material in various popular genres – newsreels (both German and Allied), documentaries, fiction films, and TV docudramas; the value of the particular type of media in teaching about the recent past was considered along with the content of each piece. Michalczyk had Holocaust survivors and educators evaluate the diverse films and their potential for teaching the Holocaust as an historical event with profound implications for humanity;

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and their reactions and experiences were incorporated into the course material.

Films can target and motivate writing

Boyd and Robitaille (1987) offer suggestions for using the popular mass media to generate topics for a composition workshop designed for the college writer but adaptable for secondary school students. They concentrate on advertising images but also use movies, monthly magazines, and television series to help foster critical thinking while writing. The workshop is built around a sequence of analogies between what students already know experientially as viewers of film and television and what they need to know as writers of essays.

Another approach to teaching college composition classes (Masiello, 1985) organizes brainstorming sessions around themes from popular movies—for example, talking about family relationships as portrayed in "Breaking Away," "The Deer Hunter," "The Godfather," "Saturday Night Fever," and "Terms of Endearment." He finds that the film viewing helps students learn to observe carefully and often results in sharper writing skills.

Moss (1987) uses the lowly, elemental daytime soap opera as a vehicle for teaching remedial writing in the SEEK program in New York City colleges. Using a VCR so that everyone can watch the episode at the same time (and filling in gaps in plot lines by reading "Soap Opera Digest"), he begins by asking the students to write on the most elementary level. The assignment is intended to tap into their passionate devotion to "the soaps"—which characters do they like the best, the least, and why? Then the class members discuss the acting and begin to impose certain critical criteria on the material. A short lesson on genres establishes appropriate aesthetic categories, and the students can begin to dissect the narrative in a composition.

Jeremiah (1987) outlines an instructional model for using television news and documentaries for writing instruction in the secondary and postsecondary classroom. He believes that the structure and content of news presentations mirrors the practice of essay writing, and thus can serve as a writing project that effectively serves instruction.

A step-by-step examination of a selected TV program can be undertaken in a single class period, using the following strategies: 1) as a warm-up mechanism, the teacher introduces the writing skill (for example, to provide information or to persuade); 2) students are allowed time for questions and comments; 3) the news segment or documentary is shown; 4) students produce an outline for the news report they will write in response to the stimulus; and 5) the outlines are assessed for organization. The outlines are collected at the end of the class period to minimize any external influences; and the students produce a full-length essay during the next class period, after their outlines have been returned.

The instruction using this model and the evaluation of the products that result should stress that the news treatment of a topic should include an introduction and adequate supporting detail and explanation. If the aim is to persuade, the writing should include adequate argumentation. Both formal and informal mechanisms should be used for evaluation, and the students should be given opportunity to revise.

A novel approach in the use of film in generating enthusiasm for writing in the elementary grades is advocated by a librarian who sponsored a writing contest in which 1,100 students participated (Simpson, 1982). She began by showing the classic short French film without dialogue, "The Red Balloon." Students viewed the film and were allowed two weeks to complete entries that included poems, short stories, or essays expressing any themes or experiences connected with the movie. Entries were judged on the qualities of appeal and originality, and all the participants received certificates on Honors Day. The winners additionally received ribbons on their certificates.

The mass media are an integral part of the environment in which today's students learn to read, write, listen, speak, and make meaning of their lives. Thus a properly designed course of instruction can use media to channel a student's enthusiasm and route it to an academically useful goal. The documents cited here are but a small sample of those in the ERIC database illustrating how teachers can do that.

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